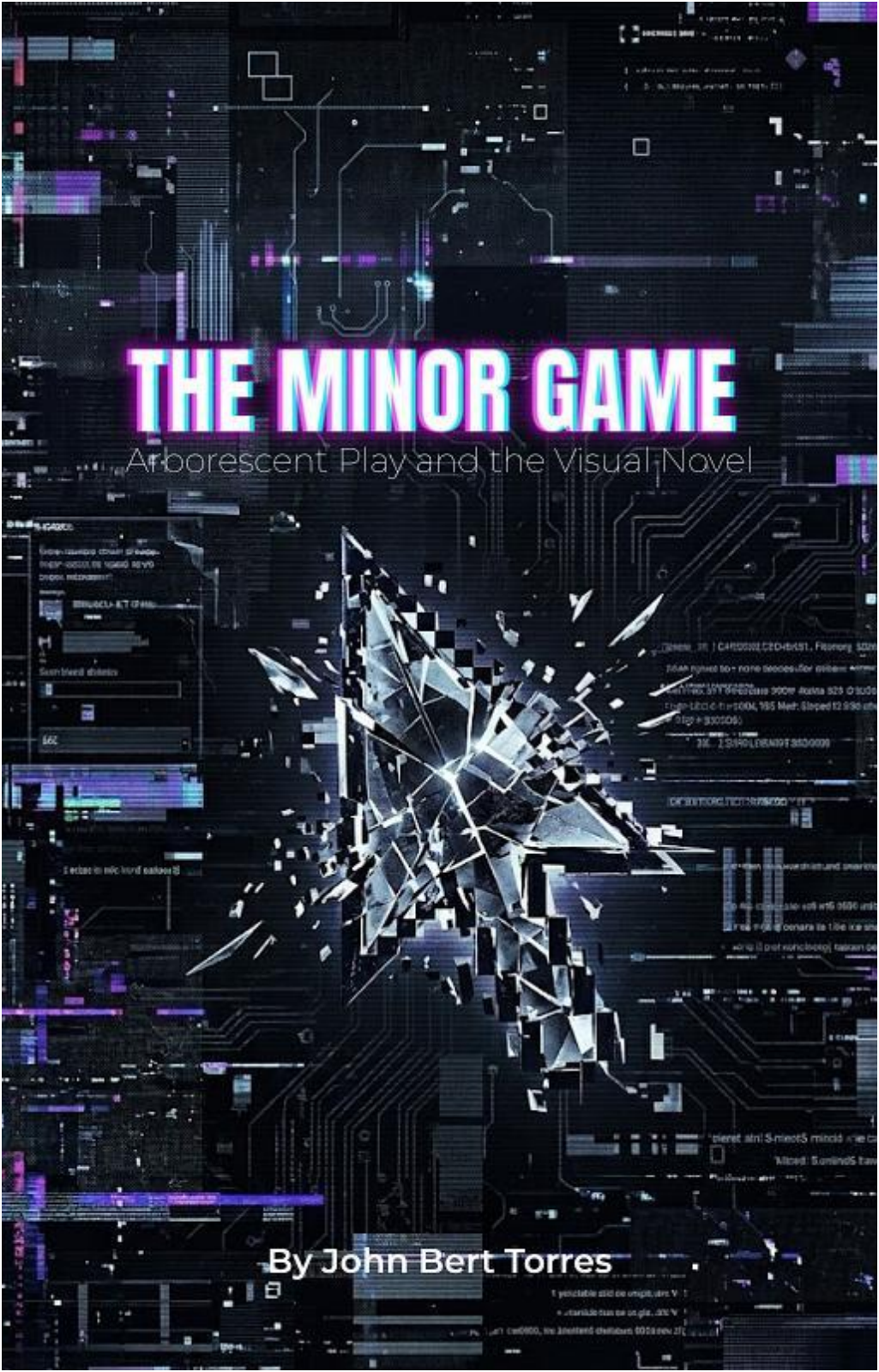
THE MINOR GAME

Arborescent Play and the Visual Novel



By John Bert Torres

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To Jesus and Mary to Jospeh

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Review of Related Literature

1

The Major Language: The Ontological Privilege of Paidia

To understand the Visual Novel (VN) as a "Minor Game," one must first map the "Major Language" it speaks against. This Major Language is not merely a set of industry trends but a consolidated ontological regime within Game Studies itself—one that privileges paidia (freeform play, agency, and expression) as the sole condition for gamic meaning.

The Ontological Crisis: 'No Agency, No Game'

The bias against linear structures is explicitly codified in the field's foundational texts. As Rouse (2023) and Cremin (2016) argue, a digital artifact that does not afford significant player agency risks forfeiting its status as a "game" entirely. Rouse (2023) provides the clearest articulation of this "Major" logic. In his definition of game design, he explicitly excludes performance-based titles like Guitar Hero or Rock Band, arguing that despite their immersion, "it's hard to consider them games due to their utter lack of room for player expression." This reveals the "arborescent" rigidity of the Major Language: it categorizes games based on the presence of paidia (improvisational choice) while dismissing the "Minor" reality of submission.

This consensus is reinforced by Nitsche (2023) and Dormans (2023), who contend that for a game to function as a meaningful artifact, it must allow for emergent interaction. Aldred (2023) similarly argues that a true avatar must afford identity construction beyond mere function—it must allow the player to act upon the world, rather than merely inhabit it.

Even Fernández-Vara (2023), in discussing adventure games, situates pleasure in "figuring out the 'what ifs' of potential storylines," a definition that illegitimates the "Kinetic Novel" which offers no deviation.

In this framework, the Visual Novel—defined by Camingue et al. (2021) through its strict constraints of static sprites, text boxes, and "On-Click Progression"—is structurally illegitimate. It is an "arborescent" (tree-like) structure in a rhizomatic discipline. By denying the player the power to deviate, the VN fails the "Major" test of agency.

The Gatekeeping Assemblage: A Tripartite Alliance

Consalvo and Paul (2019) demonstrate that this academic privileging of paidia is not a neutral theoretical position but part of a larger gatekeeping apparatus—one that, this study argues, reveals a gendered microfascism at the heart of "Real Game" culture. Their analysis maps a tripartite assemblage of exclusion, where industry, design, and academia converge to police the legitimacy of play.

REAL GAMES

What's Legitimate and What's Not in Contemporary Videogames

Mia Consalvo
Christopher A. Paul

Image of the Book Entitled Real Games: What's Legitimate and What's Not in Contemporary Videogames by authors Mia Consalvo and Christopher A. Paul

At the socio-cultural level, Consalvo and Paul show that the "hardcore" identity is a construction built on the exclusion of "casual" or narrative-heavy experiences, which are dismissed as "fake games" because they lack complex, mastery-based systems. This cultural gatekeeping determines not only which games count, but who counts as a "legitimate" player. At the level of design, Juul (2009) identifies how "hardcore" games are defined by specific structural hurdles—high time commitment, punishing mastery curves, and difficulty as a barrier to entry. In A Casual Revolution, Juul demonstrates that accessible games are dismissed precisely because their approachable design threatens the exclusivity that defines "hardcore" identity. The VN, with its "On-Click Progression" and minimal mechanical demand, violates the design codes of legitimate gaming by refusing to demand mastery at all.

Most critically, however, Consalvo and Paul demonstrate that academics participate in and legitimate this exclusion. They specifically critique Ian Bogost's procedural rhetoric framework, arguing that his prioritization of "systems thinking" over narrative reinforces masculine fantasies of systemic mastery, while simultaneously rendering narrative-driven or affect-centered games theoretically invisible. When scholars like Rouse (2023) define games through the condition of "player expression," and when Dormans (2023) installs "emergence" as the criterion of gamic meaning, they do not simply describe the field—they police it, providing theoretical justification for the same gatekeeping that Consalvo and Paul document at the cultural and industrial levels.

The Assetization of Play

This tripartite gatekeeping serves a specific capitalist function. As Chia & Ruffino (2022) argue, the fetishization of "agency" in game culture aligns with the liberal humanist ideology that links freedom, free will, and creativity to personhood—an ideology that, in practice, cultivates "masculinist, colonial, and extractivist ways of being in the world." In the era of Games-as-a-Service (GaaS), this ideology takes its most concrete form: the "freedom" to explore an open world is simply the freedom to perform unpaid engagement labor—grinding, daily login loops, battle pass progression, the designed compulsion to return and invest time to maintain or advance one's in-game position—for the developer. The player's time and attention are converted into platform value through behavioral loops engineered precisely to feel like freedom (Nielsen, 2025). The "Major Language" of Game Studies, which dismisses the VN for its lack of agency, therefore unwittingly serves the industry's push toward "Assetization" (Nielsen, 2025). By valorizing only those games that allow for "co-

creation" and "emergent play," the field elevates the very mechanisms used to extract value from players.

Image of characters from the game Genshin Impact

Against this backdrop, the "arborescent" rigidity of the Visual Novel is not a failure of design, but a refusal of labor. By offering no agency, the VN prevents the player from becoming a co-creator of value. It forces a different relation entirely: one of "Communicative Obedience." As established by Aarseth and Möring (2020), a game requires the player to "conform oneself" to its logic; in the VN, this conformity is not hidden behind an illusion of freedom, but is revealed as the structural truth of all gaming—submission to the machine. This study therefore does not treat the arborescent as an intrinsic virtue, but as a conjunctural one: it is because the rhizomatic forms of play—emergence, co-creation, expressive freedom—have been captured as the primary mechanisms of GaaS value extraction that the arborescent VN becomes, in this specific historical moment, the unexpected site of a minor practice.

2

A Genealogy of Refusal: From 'Not-Games' to 'Rhizomic Games'

If the "Major" logic of gaming is defined by the hegemony of paidia—the demand for freedom as a value-extraction mechanism—then historical attempts to resist this have fallen into specific traps. Crucially, each attempt remains caught within the logic it seeks to oppose: they operate on the rhizome's own terms, whether by abandoning the gamic structure entirely, by modulating the player's subjective relation to it, or by celebrating a rhizomic multiplicity that has already been captured by capital. In each case, the productive assemblage is left intact.

The Transcendent Refusal: The 'Not-Game'

Historically, the first major resistance to this hegemony was the "Not-Game," a term popularized by developers like Tale of Tales. Gibson Dodd (2014) analyzes this movement as a deliberate "transcendent" refusal. In his analysis of Not-Games in educational settings, Dodd observes that these texts operate by stripping away the "game"—removing win states, scores, and often mechanics entirely—to privilege mood and ambiguity. However, this project argues that the "Not-Game" commits a tactical error: it steps outside the medium to critique it. By refusing the ludus entirely, the "Not-Game" becomes a "line of flight" that leads nowhere—a total deterritorialization that risks becoming mere noise rather than a structural critique.

The Therapeutic Trap: The Idealism of ‘Zen’

A more recent development is the rise of “Slow Games” or “Zen Gaming.” Navarro-Remesal (2026) champions these titles (such as Unpacking) as a valid form of resistance, arguing that their “reflective slowness” allows players to reclaim their subjectivity from the “dromological” demands of the AAA industry. He positions this “Zen” mode as a way to inhabit the digital space consciously.

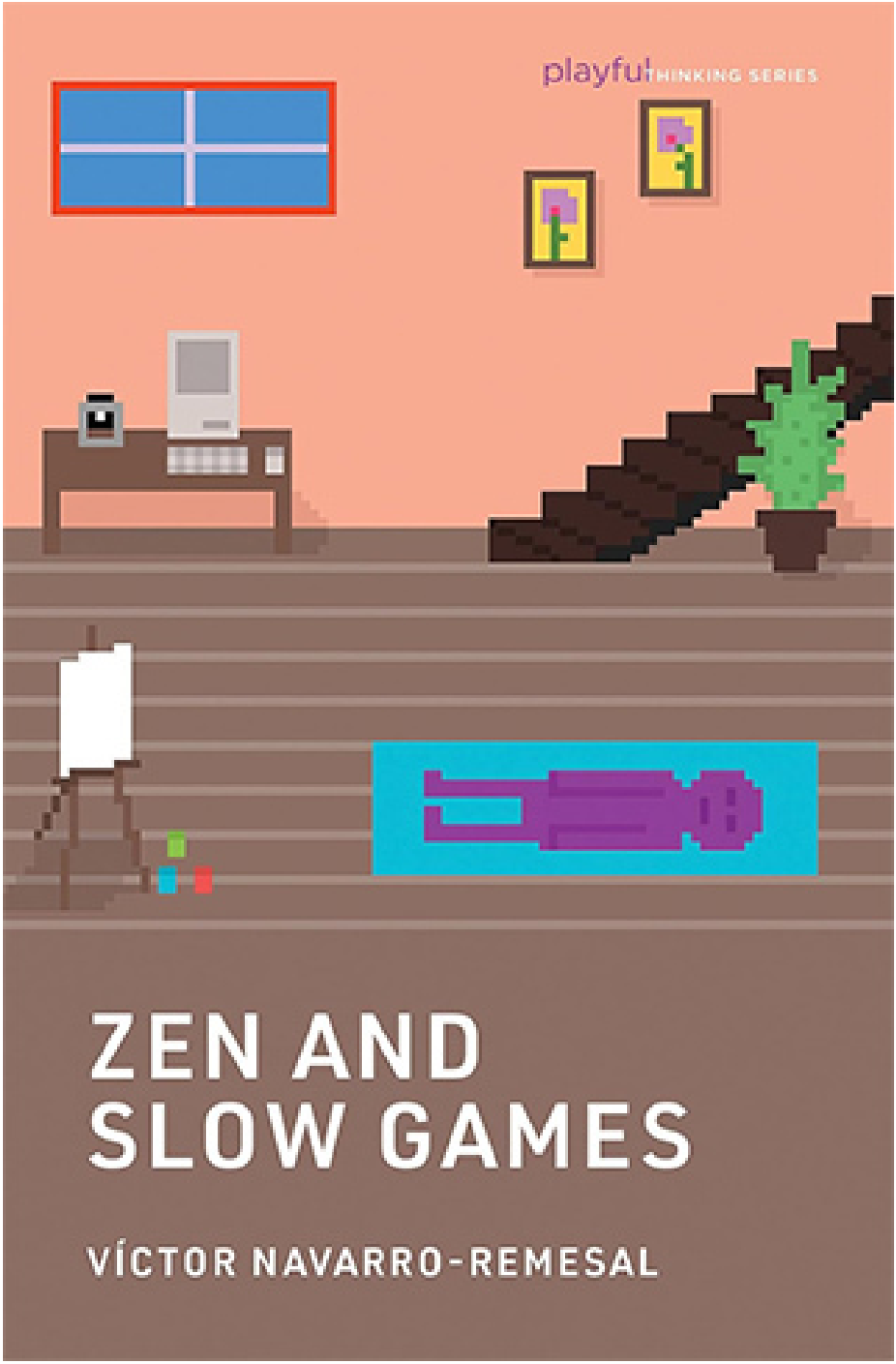

Image of Zen and Slow Games by Victor Navarro- Remesal

However, despite Navarro-Remesal's attempt to reclaim subjectivity, this project argues that his solution remains trapped within the logic of privatized mindfulness. By locating resistance solely in the player's awareness ("just think more consciously"), Navarro-Remesal reproduces the neoliberal fallacy that internal reflection is sufficient to solve structural problems. This fallacy is not incidental: Kolonias (2015), in his analysis of digital gaming culture as a biopolitical plane, shows precisely how mindfulness and self-optimization function as technologies of governance rather than escape from it. As Waszkiewicz and Bakun (2020) warn in their critique of the "cozy" aesthetic, the capitalist mode of gaming is capable of capturing even the slowest, most "conscious" player. A player may be "Zen," but they are still operating within a system designed for value extraction. Therefore, the "Slow Game" offers a false salvation: it treats the subject without dismantling the assemblage.

The Rhizomic Game: A Concession Without Critique

A third and more theoretically sophisticated attempt at resistance is the celebration of what this study terms the "Rhizomic Game"—games whose branching narratives, fluid identities, and emergent mechanics are read through a Deleuzoguattarian lens as sites of genuine multiplicity. Das (2025) reads Detroit: Become Human and Cyberpunk 2077 through the rhizome and becoming, arguing that their multiple endings and player-driven transformations embody D&G's anti-essentialism. Similarly, Hao (2021) locates becoming-animal in Everything, positioning its mechanic of species-transformation as a posthuman deterritorialization of the player-subject.

Promotional Poster of Cyberfunk 2077 Ultimate Edition

However, both of these readings, and the broader celebration of the Rhizomic Game, share a fatal contradiction: the very games they valorize are paradigmatic GaaS or AAA products, designed precisely to generate the co-creative labor and emergent play that this study identifies as the mechanisms of capitalist capture. Celebrating Cyberpunk 2077's rhizomic narrative while ignoring its predatory monetization structures is not resistance; it is the Slow Game error in theoretical dress—locating freedom in a form that capital has already mapped and occupied. Belmonte (2021), in the most honest and rigorous of these readings, actually arrives at the right diagnosis: analyzing Disco Elysium, he concludes that "choice is always arborescent" in games, that no game can be fully rhizomic because all are closed texts with finite variables. But Belmonte treats this as a limitation to be mourned—the rhizome hanged on the tree—rather than as the conjunctural condition that makes the arborescent the unexpected site of a minor practice. He sees the VN's structural truth without seeing its political potential.

The Gap for the Minor The "Real Game" captures labor; the "Not-Game" abandons the structure; the "Slow Game" offers an idealistic escape from within; and the "Rhizomic Game" celebrates a multiplicity that capital has already digested. Each of these positions fails because it operates in relation to the dominant logic of paidia without dismantling the productive assemblage that subtends it. The Visual Novel, therefore, occupies a unique position. It does not leave the structure, nor does it rely on the player's "mindset" for resistance, nor does it

mistake captured rhizomes for liberation. Instead, it employs Arborescent-Play: a structural resistance that operates regardless of the player's intent, forcing a confrontation with the machine through the mechanics of obedience itself.

3

Minor Practice and the Politics of Obedience

A Field-Level Mislocalization

The application of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of Minor Literature to digital games has generated a growing body of scholarship over the past two decades. Yet across this body of work—from Cremin's (2016; 2025) affective theory of form, to Franklin's (2009) radical gameplay, to Mukherjee's (2016) paratext-based minor literature, to the more recent Deleuzoguattarian readings of posthuman affect (Hao, 2021; Wilde, 2024) and rhizomic narrative (Das, 2025; Belmonte, 2021)—a systematic error recurs: the minor is consistently mislocated. It is placed in the object's cultural position, in the player's radical break from the system, in representational or narrative content, in subjective affective experience, or in the game's structural multiplicity. What none of these accounts locate the minor in is the process of enunciation itself—in what the mechanical structure does, independently of what it represents, how it feels, or where it sits in the cultural economy. This study argues that this mislocalization is not accidental but structural: it reflects the field's persistent anchoring in the Major Language's own terms, evaluating the minor by the standards of the very regime it is supposed to contest. The following section maps the three principal variants of this error, before proposing the site where this study locates the minor instead.

Contra Cremin: Process, Not Object Cremin (2016) argues that the "minor" is a latent potential within any game, suggesting that even AAA titles can trigger a "becoming-minor" through player affect. In her more recent and theoretically developed work, Cremin (2025) refines this position by introducing the ludo-diagram—the invisible affective potentialities that the developer diagrams and the player vitalizes—alongside the distinction between

major and minor videogames adapted from Kafka. Here, her framework comes closest to the right site: the minor is located in the play of forces rather than in narrative content alone. Yet, when Cremin (2025) applies the major/minor distinction, she retreats to the action-image—what the game scripts and represents—as the criterion of minorness. McDonald's: The Video Game is dismissed as minor because its counter-hegemonic ideology is "scripted" and explicit; The Last of Us "comes closer" because its jamming moment is structurally integral rather than stated. In both cases, what makes a game minor is the affective and narrative content of the action-image, not the mechanics of enunciation themselves.

This project does not dispute that AAA games are categorically incapable of producing minor practices—to do so would be to repeat the same ontological gatekeeping the study critiques. Rather, as Harper (2018) notes in her analysis of Cremin's framework, the problem is that Cremin confuses the object with the process of enunciation. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of Kafka in Toward a Minor Literature (1986), this project asserts that the "minor" is defined not by the cultural or industrial position of the object, nor by the affective content it scripts, but by what the enunciation does—how it uses the major language, what forces it mobilizes, what it causes to stutter. Just as Deleuze and Guattari do not claim that Kafka escaped the commodity form of publishing, this study does not claim that the VN escapes the market. The VN is sold on Steam; it is a commodity like any other game. The distinction lies not in its exchange relation but in its mechanical enunciation: the On-Click Progression, the refusal of emergence, the "cramped space" of the text box. It is this enunciation—not the object's budget, platform, or scripted ideology—that constitutes its minor practice.

Contra Franklin: Stuttering, Not Breaking Where Cremin is too anchored in the action-image, Franklin (2009) is too focused on the break. She identifies "Minor Practice" with noise and illegibility, arguing that resistance requires "radical gameplay" that disrupts the feedback loop entirely. This project counters that true resistance lies not in destroying the language, but in making it "stutter." The Visual Novel does not break the code (as in a glitch); rather, it exposes the "gaming language" itself by stripping away the illusion of paidia (freedom). By reducing the interaction to a rigid, rhythmic "Click," the VN forces the "Major" language of agency to stutter, revealing the structural obedience that usually remains hidden behind the spectacle of open worlds.

Contra Mukherjee: Subjectivity, Not Representation Mukherjee (2016) mislocates the "minor" in the paratexts (AARs, fan fiction), retreating into the realm of representation. A

related error is committed by scholars who locate the minor in the player's subjective affective experience of transformation—such as Hao (2021) and Wilde (2024), who read becoming-animal in Everything and Stray respectively as instances of posthuman deterritorialization. While these studies productively extend D&G's affective vocabulary into game studies, they remain anchored in what the player feels and experiences, rather than what the mechanical enunciation does structurally. This project argues that the "becoming-minor" of the VN is not a literary exercise of rewriting the story, nor an affective operation experienced by the player-subject, but a structural operation of "becoming-imperceptible." The "Arborescent-Play" of the VN is not about the player expressing or transforming themselves; it is about the player losing themselves—a process that happens regardless of their subjectivity, built into the machine's demand itself.

The Materiality of the Minor: Conforming to the Machine

To understand how this resistance functions, we must look to the specific ontology of the VN. Aarseth and Möring (2020) and Aarseth and Calleja (2015) posit that a game is a four-dimensional field (Mental, Semiotic, Mechanical, Material), arguing that to understand a game, the player must "conform oneself" to its specific logic. In the "Major Game," this conformity is hidden. Mauger (2023) argues that a good interface "should never demand more attention than the gameplay itself," claiming that deep immersion only begins when the user is "no longer conscious of the interface." Keogh (2018) similarly argues, from a phenomenological standpoint, that player and game are entangled through embodied perception across the screen—that the player thinks in terms of forces, frictions, and affordances rather than representations. His framework is the most sophisticated account of game-immanent analysis available, and it shares this study's commitment to attending to what the game does rather than what it means. However, Keogh's framework ultimately locates meaning in the player's embodied experience of the game—in how the interaction feels across the interface. The VN's minor practice is not in how submission feels to the player; it is in what the On-Click Progression enunciates structurally, independent of any player's subjectivity.

The Visual Novel violates Mauger's rule. Defined by Camingue et al. (2021) as a genre constrained by "text boxes, static sprites, and log functions," the VN is its interface. The text box does not vanish; it is the "cramped space" the player inhabits. The interface operates as an explicit Order-Word. The mandatory "Click" to advance the text box is a Nondiegetic

Machine Act (Galloway, 2006) that the player must perform consciously. By refusing to let the interface disappear, the VN forces the player to confront their own "ludic servitude."

4

Conjunctural Context: The Indie Agencement and the Conditions of Minor Production

The three preceding sections have mapped the theoretical and critical terrain that the Visual Novel inhabits as a Minor Game: the Major Language it speaks against, the genealogy of failed resistances it supersedes, and the specific politics of obedience that constitute its minor practice. To fully situate this practice, however, one must account for the material conditions under which these particular games are produced. This section does not function as a separate object of analysis but as conjunctural context—an account of the political-economic and industrial conditions that make the VN's refusal intelligible and, indeed, possible.

A productive theoretical precedent for this conjunctural reading is offered by Lampert (2023). Analyzing AlphaGo through a Deleuzoguattarian nomadology, Lampert finds that AlphaGo is "molar at the micro level" — its machine-learning processes are purely statistical, indifferent to spatial relations — yet produces results that appear nomadic and brilliant at the macro level. He concludes that nomadism may function as an emergent property rather than an intrinsic one: what a structure is at the level of its mechanics does not determine what it does at the level of force relations. This observation is directly analogous to the conjunctural claim of this study: the VN's arborescent structure does not intrinsically produce a minor practice; it is the specific historical conjuncture — in which rhizomatic forms have been captured as GaaS labor — that produces the arborescent as the site of deterritorialization. The minor is not in the machine; it emerges from the machine's position within a field of forces.

The Trap of the 'Indie Entrepreneur'

The production of minor games like Until Then, Urban Myth Dissolution Center, and of the Devil occurs within the independent development scene, a space that has historically positioned itself against the logic of the AAA industry. Styhre and Remneland-Wikhamn (2021) argue that indie developers wage a "war against the cliché," leveraging what they term the "Indie Agencement"—a specific assemblage of passion, craft, and counter-cultural identity—to produce games that challenge dominant conventions. However, recent political economy scholarship complicates this portrait. Hong (2013) argues that the "participatory culture" of indie and modding scenes is frequently weaponized as unpaid labor, where developers become "entrepreneurs of the self" who self-exploit in hopes of market success. Lipkin (2019) describes this as the "Indiepocalypse"—a market condition where the "passion" of the developer is extracted by platforms to fuel an oversaturated economy of assets. Jong (2020), whose dissertation examines the intersection of GamerGate and feminist organizing in academic game culture, further illuminates how developer "passion" is structurally entangled with precarity and gendered labor exploitation, particularly for women and non-binary developers in independent scenes. Therefore, the indie context alone cannot guarantee a minor practice; it may simply reproduce the neoliberal logic of the "enterprising self" that demands constant optimization.

The Visual Novel as a Double-Refusal

It is within this conjuncture that the VN developer's choice to strip gameplay to its minimal condition—the Order-Word, the On-Click Progression, the refusal of emergence—becomes legible as a political act rather than merely a stylistic one. In producing games that cannot be "upgraded" into GaaS ecosystems, that generate no community content, and that demand no mastery to complete, the VN developer engages in what this study identifies as a double-refusal: a rejection of both the "Major" logic of AAA production and the "indie" logic of entrepreneurial self-exploitation. This double-refusal does not originate from the developer's intent, which falls outside this study's scope of analysis, but is an effect readable from the mechanical structure of the texts themselves. It is this structure—the game's refusal of productive play—that this study takes as its object, with the indie conjuncture serving as the condition of possibility that makes such a structure legible as micropolitical rather than merely incomplete.

5

Toward New Universes of Value

Ultimately, the goal of this "Arborescent-Play" is the creation of what Guattari (1995) calls "new universes of value." By submitting to a rigid machine that refuses to extract their labor, the player is liberated from the burden of being a "co-creator" of value. In the silence between the clicks, the assemblage of the VN and its conjunctural conditions produces a micropolitical event: the player "becomes-imperceptible," shedding the identity of the "Hardcore Gamer" and the "Productive Worker." The Visual Novel is thus a constructivist project: it builds a temporary autonomous zone where the dominant logic—Action = Value—is suspended in favor of the logic of the affect: Submission = Intensity.

About the Author